KICKSHAWS

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Readers are encouraged to send their own favorite linguistic kickshaws to the Kickshaws Editor. All answers known to the editor appear in the Answers and Solutions at the end of this issue.

Mad British Ship Names

The English have shown magnificent taste in naming their men-of-war. Some of the names have been so dramatic that had they been displayed on ensigns in the language of their naval enemies, I have no doubt one lone Britisher could have kept an entire task force at bay. Examples: INDOMITABLE, INTREPID, INDEFATIGABLE, VICTORIOUS, VALIANT, INVINCIBLE, REDOUBTABLE, FORMIDABLE, DAUNTLESS, REPULSE, EXCALIBUR, VIGILANT, RELENTLESS, AVENGER, ADAMANT and RESOLUTE. Some of these fine names must have been worth twenty extra guns at least.

If Mad Magazine decided to lampoon the Royal Navy, it would probably start with the names of the ships. HMS UNFATHOMABLE would, of course, be a ship of shallow draught. The Mad Flotilla would surely include REPULSIVE, INSUFFERABLE, ABOMINABLE, INDUBITABLE, UNMENTIONABLE (and her sister ships UNSPEAKABLE and INEFFABLE), IMPECCABLE, INSENSIBLE, INNOCUOUS, INCORRIGIBLE, INTEMPERATE and INEBRIATED.

The Flavor of Words

WONDERFUL is good and AWFUL is bad, and yet AWE and WONDER are synonyms. This is not startling; language follows its own laws of inertia, and if a word is used frequently enough in a positive or negative context, it will absorb the flavor of that context into its meaning. PREDICAMENT originally meant nothing more than hypothesis, and EMERGENCY meant circumstance. But because of their primary usage in negative contexts, they have become negative words, denoting unpleasant situations. Words behave that way, and it's amusing to trace the history of their rise or fall on the value scale, though generally such history is obscure.

The history of olfactory verbs in English is fascinating. Originally, the word STINK was completely neutral. It meant simply to emit a smell, so that as late as the 15th century an English poet could write "The rose doth stynk full swetely." But by Elizabethan times the word had degenerated and meant only to smell offensively. So, SMELL took the place of STINK as the neutral word. But not for long. To smell very quickly came to be understood (when used intransitively) as to stink. To have an odor may have plugged the gap for a time, but only a short time. Today it, too, means to stink. Even if we bend over backward, we are stymied. If there is an odor emanating from your neighbor's car, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and you mention that the interior of his car is FRAGRANT, he'll rush for the Airwick. Any woman will do the same if you blandly remark that her kitchen impinges on the olfactory nerves. There is no use in attempting to coin a neutral word. It will degenerate quickly. It appears to be characteristic of our race that no smell at all is good, while any smell, however fragrant, is bad.

Minipuzzles

As is evident, this puzzle can be solved with E's:

Across	Down
1. solemn	1. fret
2. furies	2. bird
3. prevent	3. cause
4. stiff	4. poem
5. penetrate	5. compound

	1	2	3	4	5
1	_	_	_	_	E
2	_	_	_	E	_
3	_	_	E	_	_
4	_	E	_	_	_
5	E	_	_	_	_

As anyone who has composed them will bear out, minipuzzles are simple to create. After typing the last sentence, I required about two minutes to come up with the four-by-four: SAME ORAL MESS EASE. Challenge: compose a four-by-four with sixteen different letters!

Lewisites and Lewisisms

Frank Lewis, the Nation's crossword puzzle-maker, adapted the so-called British crossword to American standards and in so doing came up with a style that has probably never been duplicated on either side of the Atlantic. The puzzles are difficult but unbelievably entertaining, combining with straight definitons, puns, anagrams, and other forms of trickery. For instance, he once filled 20 empty squares with a certain well-known phrase and gave as clue: AXMASM (5,3,2,3,7). The numbers give the word lengths of the five-word phrase. Answer: GREAT DAY IN THE MORNING. Another Lewisism, perhaps borrowed from Dudeney's 300 Best Word Puzzles: KINI (1,6,4,4,3,3,4,4,4).

Answer: A LITTLE MORE THAN KIN AND LESS THAN KIND. One more example: First Boston, then Milwaukee, now Atlanta (3,4,2, 3,5). Answer: THE HOME OF THE BRAVE. Now you're ready for the Lewisism quiz:

1. Blind, insane (3,2,5,3,2,4)
2. Horse doctor's remedy? (4,7)
3. Route of the cornborer (2,3,3,3,3,3,5)
4. Crossing the Rubicon (9,9)
5. Infantry? (5,2,4)
6. They can be rearranged to spell direct (7,2,6)
7. Penguin (3,2,6)
8. A Votre Sante (6,5)
9. The early morning air of Berlin (2,3,1,4,2,3,2,2,3,7)
10. Og is about all you can get (4,3,4,2)

What's the Question?

Readers are asked to supply the most plausible questions that might have elicited the following answers, and then to compare their solutions with those of the Kickshaws editor. None of these is original with the latter:

1. 9 W.
2. Dr. Livingstone, I presume.
3. Oh, about 20 drachmas a week.
4. No strings attached.
5. Crick.
6. February 29th, for example.
7. Chromatic scales.

Irish Bulls

An Irish Bull is an apparently logical expression with a built-in inconsistency. Some of the classics are truly hilarious; new ones are created every day and not only by the Irish. Just to get an idea of the lexicographical sense of humor, I spent a half hour in the library the other day, checking to see what clever examples the dictionary-makers provide us. I was disappointed to find even most of the big dictionaries sufficiently lacking in a sense of humor to provide no example at all. Only four in the library's stock, which included the new American Heritage Dictionary and the big Random House, enhanced their definitions with examples:

Oxford English Dictionary: dumb speaker!
Webster's Second and Third New International Dictionaries:
it was hereditary in his family to have no children.

Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary: I make my own imported cigars.

Until one of our readers finds a better dictionary example, I'm inclined to give the laurels to Webster's.

The Last Word

This game requires a list of two-letter words. The list need not be comprehensive; it is required only that the two players agree on it. Alternately they select a word with the restrictions that the first word selected must start with an A, and thereafter each word must occur later in the dictionary than the opponent's previous word and must have exactly one crash (occurrence of the same letter in the same position) with the previous word. The winner is the player who picks the last word. If you play the game with the words in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, the list is: AD, AI, AM, AN, AS, AT, AX, BE, BY, DO, EM, EN, FA, GO, HE, ID, IF, IN, IS, IT, LA, LO, MA, ME, MI, MY, NO, OF, OH, ON, OR, OS, OX, PA, PI, RE, SI, SO, TI, TO, UP, US, WE. Would you prefer to play first or second?

The game is not hard to analyze. WE is obviously a dead-end, as are US and TO. They are safe words, and every word having a single crash with any of them is unsafe. We mark all the unsafe words generated by them and continue to work backwards. The first unmarked word we come to, SI, is safe; the only replies to it, SO and TI, can each be converted to the safe word TO. In this way we extend the list of safe words, which continues: PA, OX, MY, IT, EN, and AM. Thus the first player has the advantage and will win against any defense, provided he starts with AM and responds to his opponent's choices by always sticking to the safe track. If he starts with any of the other six options, he allows his opponent to enter the safe track. AD and AI can be converted to AM; AN, AS, AT or AX can be converted to EN, US, IT or OX, respectively.

Certainly the safe track will vary with the dictionary used. Using the above list, readers are invited to determine who has the advantage and his winning strategy in several variants of the game that come to mind. First, consider the misere version as applied to the original game and the variants discussed below. A misere version of a game is one in which the winning objective is reversed; in the game above, the loser in the misere version is the last player having a legal play available. Other variants:

1. Require not crashes but jostles (repetition of letters in any position). For example, AM can be converted to AX, EM, MA or MY, among others.

2. Require non-crashing jostles. For example, AM can be converted only to FA, LA, MA, ME, MI, MY or PA.

3. Extend the game to three-letter words, requiring either 1 crash, 2 crashes, or some combination of crashes and jostles.

In all variants, the paramount rule that the words must progress in dictionary order is necessary to ensure a terminating game.

The Last Word II

Like the previous games, the following is deterministic, i.e., reducible to a winning strategy which will make all game sequences virtual carbon copies of each other, provided both players know the strategy. But like chess, checkers, go, hex, and possibly even the third variant of the two-letter word game described above, determination of the winning strategy is probably beyond the capability even of the most advanced existing digital computer. In fact it is not short-sighted to assert that no computer, now or in the future, can ever relegate these games to the status of tic-tac-toe, for even if a computer solution were obtained, what would we do with the enormous game "trees" representing the winning strategy?

The game is played on a five-by-five grid. The two opponents move alternately, each move consisting of introducing at least one new five-letter word by completing one of the ten lines (five rows, five columns). Such completion involves the placement of from one to five letters on some previously uncompleted line. All letters placed on a given turn must be on the same line, and all lines completed on a turn must be words. Determination of what is or is not a word is left to a dictionary of the players' choice, which is used at most once per game (in the event of a challenge -- the winner of a challenge, if one is made, wins the game). The players agree also on the restrictions, if any, imposed, e.g., against capitalized, inflected, obsolete, foreign and/or slang words. Finally, to prevent what can be an exciting game from degenerating into boredom, a time limit of one or two minutes between moves should be imposed.

To avoid confusing this "last word" game with the previously-described two-letter word game, call it sinko. Clearly, the first move must involve placing five letters on one of the ten lines, forming a word. The second play will involve either the placement of five letters on a line parallel to the first play or four letters on an intersecting line. Third play involves placing either five or three letters in the first case and four in the second. As in standard crossword puzzles, column words read downwards and row words, left to right. Winner, of course, is the last player making a legal move.

The rules of sinko are much simpler than they sound, though the winning strategy may remain forever a mystery. Try the game a few times; you'll find it challenging and stimulating. You'll probably find that the second player wins considerably more than half the games at the outset, but that as two players become more experienced, the frequency of wins by first and second player (regardless of the respective abilities of the two players) tends to equalize. Putting it differently, if you select an opponent good enough to beat you two times out of three playing first in a large sample of games, he'll probably beat you two games out of three playing second also.

Heads 'n Tails Words

In the February 1970 issue, I invited readers to compile a list of 26 words such as edged in which the letter groups preceding and following the middle letter are the same, with each letter of the alphabet serving as "core". Josefa Byrne of Mill Valley, California has obliged, possibly with as complete a list as can be obtained (unless some reader can find a valid word in any English-language dictionary with a core Q). Most of these words can be found in the Second or Third Editions of Webster's; the Q and Z cores are taken from the Life Atlas (Baquba is a city in Iraq, and Azzaz a cape in Libya).

MIAMI, ABA, COCCO, ADA, PEP, KAFKA, MAGMA, OUTSHOUTS, ONION, ANJAN, EKE, ALA, PAMPA, SENSE, BOB, APA, BAQUBA, VERVE, HOTSHOT, ESTES, DUD, EVE, EWE, OXO, EYE, AZZAZ

Mrs. Byrne characterizes the obverse and reverse sides of the Golden State with anagrams that read like book titles:

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA - hot sun, or life in a car
THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA - chance stay, or safe in a bar

These rhyme and scan well if read as a quatrain (if you "rush" the third line a little); too bad the following "poem" made up of mutually anagrammatic sentences lacks rhyme and meter. Notwithstanding, it is still quite a production. It was relayed by Mrs. Byrne from the English magic magazine Pentagram:

Washington crossing the Delaware.
He saw his ragged continentals row.
A wet crew gain Hessian stronghold.
And so this general watches rowing.
A hard howling, tossing water scene,
The cold waters swashing on in rage.

Isolanos

In the February 1969 issue, Rudolph Castown conjectured that there are no isolanos (n-letter words with which no words have exactly n - 1 crashes) for n less than five. This would imply that in the word ladder game every pair of four-letter words can be transmuted, one to the other, e.g., LEAD to GOLD via READ, ROAD, GOAD. I thought the conjecture unlikely and was confident that I even had some three-letter isolanos in GNU, OVA, EBB and EMU, but Webster's Third listed GAU, AVA, EBO and EME as garbles. IMP fared even worse, so I sent some four-letter candidates to the editor: INCH, JINN, OYEZ, UGLY, TAXI, ONCE, HYMN and ENVY. He disposed of them with ITCH; JINX; OYER; AGLY; TAXT, TALI, TARI; ONCA, ONDE, ANCE; HYEN; INVY. I decided to spare the editor more spadework and attacked the big Webster's myself. I failed with KIWI and LYNX, but found my isolano in LLYN (a lake). It has been pointed out that Webster's Second lists LOYN as an obsolete word, but I feel that the absence of this word in the Third is conclusive, unless one is prepared to add dictionaries of Old and Middle English to the list of authorities (in which case, I suspect, we'll really have a rich new source of isolanos!). If Webster's Fourth should drop LLYN, I'll withdraw it from the isolano list.

After all that research, I feel it's my turn to conjecture: 1. No three-letter isolanos exist. 2. There are at least 100 four-letter isolanos. I would welcome seeing the first conjecture proved false.

The reverse phenomenon, the onalosi, is a word with garbles in every position, such as SHORES (CHORES, STORES, SHARES, SHOVES, SHORTS, SHORED). Can anybody find a longer onalosi?

Assorted Contributions

Walter Penney of Greenbelt, Maryland introduces the category of "Literal Words", e.g. DFI (deify), FND (effendi), XLNC, XPDNC, MNNC. In attempting to add to his list, I find the only passable items to be RST (arrestee) and SNE (essene -- old pronunciation). My other attempts vary from very poor to completely unacceptable: BUT, HNC, SNC, NRG and XCB (ex-Seabee). Ross Eckler adds NME (and with some diffidence, PNE, MRE and NTT). Can the readers augment our modest list?

Editor Eckler advises that the January 1970 Tel-news issued by New Jersey Bell Telephone reports that the longest surname in a U.S. telephone directory belongs to a Dallas resident named Herbert Wolfeschlaegelsteinhausenbergerhaupfstedt. I wonder how many times the gentleman has said "Just call me Herb". Page 151 of

Dmitri Borgmann's Language on Vacation (Scribner's, 1965) describes a man in Philadelphia with a suspiciously similar surname. The February 1970 Colloquy reported a counterexample to the F.X. O'B. conjecture, the combination of initials almost certainly implying the name Francis (or Frank) Xavier O'Brien. There is an F.X. O'Byrne living in Queens, N.Y. according to the latest telephone directory. Well, that's close enough to be called the exception that proves the rule. But what about the short card I received from Chicago, signed Frederick Xerxes O'Bannon? I checked the greater Chicago directory, but evidently the writer has an unlisted phone.

Howard Bergerson collects "pyramid words" such as A, DID and BANANA, in which the letter frequencies are 1; 1,2; 1,2,3; etc. He has a long list of 1-2-3 words, including ACACIA, HORROR, NEEDED, COCOON, PEPPER, BEDDED, WEDDED, POWWOW, BOWWOW and HUBBUB. From the 1969 Britannica Yearbook he has plucked the 1-2-3-4 word PEPPERETTE (a girl who does a dance routine during an intermission at an athletic event); a newspaper story on one of these girls might well be headlined: TENNESSEE'S SLEEVELESS PEPPERETTE. Ross Eckler augments the list with RESTRESSES and REMEMBERER. When asked if any 1-2-3-4-5 words existed, Dmitri Borgmann commented that it would be a frightfully difficult task to find such a word; nevertheless, he came up with the coinage of KNELLLESSNESSES (referring to the respective conditions of those church bells that have ceased to sound because of mechanical defects or other reasons). Anyone for a 1-2-3-4-5-6?

Howard also adds another nine-letter, one-syllable word, SPLOTCHED, to the previous list: STRENGTHS, SCREECHED, SQUELCHED, SCROUNGED, STRETCHED and SCRATCHED. Any reader who extends the list will receive the following rewards: for another niner starting with S, an encomium; kudos for a niner not starting with S; and for a tenner, a full-fledged triumph.

Deferential Adjectives and Persistent Adjectives

Most adjectives precede the noun they modify. However, Marvin Epstein of Montclair, New Jersey points out that there exist a number of phrases (many relating to the Middle Ages) in which the adjective deferentially follows the noun:

durance vile	mother superior	parts unknown
fee simple	heir apparent	bend sinister
court martial	heir presumptive	letters patent
sergeant major	knight errant	prince charming
lady fair	attorney general	battle royal

It is not difficult to discover words ending in -LY which are adjectives as well as adverbs. However, Marvin Epstein has identified a handful of adjectives which can still be adjectives when -LY is added: DEAD, GOOD, LONE, LIVE, KIND, PORT, SICK and GAIN. Of these, the adjectives LONE and PORT deserve the title of persistent because when -LY is added they are solely adjectives; there is no adverbial usage.

The Riddler of Richmond

Last December I received a letter postmarked Staten Island, N. Y. There was no return address, and it was signed simply, The Riddler. From the riddles themselves, the short accompanying paragraph, and the spidery handwriting, I surmise that the Riddler is a retired man in his late seventies, enamored of the sonnet form and of the old-fashioned English riddle-poem (such as "Little Nancy Netticoat"), and quite unconcerned whether or not anyone solves his blasted riddles. (Need I add that he failed to include the answers to his three riddles?)

I was better able to deduce the character of the Riddler than to solve his riddles. I believe I've unraveled one and have a tenuous fix on another, but one of them is a complete mystery to me. I hopefully pass them on to the readers for solution.

I

A drop translucent, shimmering and pale
Distilled a dozen times with patient care
And once again distilled. It cannot fail
To sweeten, calm, and purify the air.
Though less than this were folly to prepare,
And further distillation no avail,
The efficacious power was always there,
Imperfect though in form and in detail.

Yet brewer, chemist, Nature, all in league
Could never duplicate the childlike art.
Nor could a thousand artisans intrigue
To halt the process once it had its start.
Were there no eyes to view it and no nose
To smell it, still the heart would it disclose.

II

A murderess they style her, and yet
Her victims know her character full well.

She makes wives widows, true, but they forget
Her bounties when they toll the mournful bell.
Each swain who courts her hopes by her to gain
But when she yields her favors, thanks her not.
The owner of a world desired twain
And felt her aid was but his rightful lot.

He sought to bend her to his will, but she
Cared nothing for his purposes and checked
His lofty enterprise. He raged to see
His hopes by female whim thus sorely wrecked.
He lashed her violently with whips of steel
In vain. His feeble blows she did not feel.

III

She noticed something missing. One short line --
A trifle, but they added it next day.
And then it was complete. She could not say
That more was lacking, whether hers or mine.
But falsely balanced scales will falsely weigh
Their burdens. When I spoke of this to her,
She begged me to forbear, nor to deter
Her in her purpose or her trust betray.

That left me on the sharp horns of a D.
Her purposes run counter to mine and yours.
And well I know that you would take it I.
For what her sister likes, Emma deplores.
Since I can't please you both, I'll wait and see.
And both of you will know the reason why.

Ambiguity

In response to Art Seidenbaum's article "The Trouble With Students" in West Magazine, Rich Goren of Hollywood wrote the following letter to the editor: "...Mr. Seidenbaum says about Santa Cruz University, 'I counted girls going barefoot to classes; about one in every four.' Does he mean that one out of every four girls goes barefoot to class, or that barefoot girls go to one out of every four classes, or that girls choose to go to one out of every four classes barefoot, or that one of every four students at Santa Cruz is a barefoot girl, or that the girls at Santa Cruz have four legs?"

I can think of two more plausible interpretations and have no doubt that our readers will find many more.